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ABSTRACT

An outside evaluator can help an institution open up dialogue and bring about change by focusing the attention of top administrators, faculty, and students on goals seen as important by groups within the institution. Bringing in an outside evaluator to colleges and universities, English departments and writing programs, can be a touchy, often destructive business, if the person or group sponsoring the evaluation does not first lay the necessary groundwork. In order to serve the needs of an institution, all (or at least as many as possible) of the people who will be affected by an evaluation report should be consulted in advance of the visit. Experience in evaluating programs all over the United States has produced 6 guidelines for bringing in an outside evaluator: (1) set goals for what the evaluator is to look at and why; (2) lay the groundwork for the outside evaluator, involving everyone affected; (3) give the evaluator a written overview of the state of things at the institution, an overview that reflects as much as possible the interests of everyone the evaluation will affect; (4) furnish as much representative material and information as possible to help the evaluator accomplish the job; (5) arrange on-campus meetings for the evaluator with administrators, faculty, students, support personnel, and part-timers; and (6) require a full, written report from the evaluators within 4 weeks. (SR)

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OPENING DISCOURSE: THE BENEFITS OF AN OUTSIDE EVALUATOR

I have served as an outside evaluator for colleges and universities, English departments and writing programs for over fifteen years. I quickly learned that bringing in an outside evaluator can be a touchy business, and often destructive, if the person or group sponsoring the evaluation does not lay the necessary groundwork first. In order for an outside evaluator to serve the needs of an institution all, or at least as many as possible, of the people who will be effected by any evaluation report should be consulted in advance of any visit. To do otherwise almost guarantees that people at the institution will be upset and that the purpose of the evaluation will fail.

To avoid failure and to insure success those initiating the evaluation need to be clear about their purposes. The purposes of an outside evaluation may include finding out the strengths and weaknesses of a program; or getting an outside viewpoint on personnel needs, program needs, intra-institutional coordination; or getting "objective" information in order to report to other agencies on how well or poorly a particular program or other entity is doing. Whatever the purpose, bringing in an outside evaluator is an opportunity for an institution to open up dialogue - to often begin discourse that will get groups of people talking together and working together as they decide what they want from the outside evaluator.

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From my experience in evaluating programs all over the country and abroad I have come up with six "rules" that can guide people within programs, departments and institutions as they prepare to bring in an outside evaluator.

RULE ONE: Set goals for what you want the evaluator(s) to look at and why.

Your goals for the evaluation will grow out of your needs, problems and questions. Are you hoping to show the administration, board of trustees or alumni what your program or department is accomplishing or what it needs? Do you need a writing program director to develop a better coordinated program? Do you need in-service work for faculty or new teaching assistants? Do you need a more articulated program? A Writing Across the Curriculum program? A writing center? Reading, writing, critical thinking focuses in your general education courses? Whatever the needs, they should be made as clear as possible so that they can be articulated clearly for the evaluator(s).

At one technical college that I evaluated I talked to administrators, faculty and students (something I try to do in any evaluation). In my discussion with administrators I was told they were concerned about the dated writing curriculum of the English Department, the unchanging course descriptions, the lack of professional involvement of tenured-in faculty. When I met with faculty and visited their classes I was told about lack of travel support, lack of faculty development workshops, and the demands of teaching five classes a quarter with no time to rethink the courses. Students told me that in the writing classes they did little sustained writing and spent most of the time on

the "grammar stuff we had in high school and grade school." I learned that all the administration of writing courses, business writing courses, literature courses and everything else that needed an administrator in the English department was done by the chair.

In my final report along with a chronicle of whom I had met with and how my time was spent I outlined the concerns of these three groups and made the obvious recommendations that a faculty development program be started; that faculty apply for release time to develop new courses, attend professional meetings, or take part in workshops or courses; that another administrator primarily responsible for writing be hired or that an assistant to the chair who was knowledgeable about recent theory, research and practice in composition be appointed. I also recommended ways for faculty, administrators and students to get together to move forward on all these concerns. I made other recommendations about support services and such and a year later I received a letter in which I learned that many of the recommendations had been implemented or were being implemented. I also learned that the college had set up a system whereby administrators, faculty and students met regularly to discuss concerns of common interest.

RULE TWO: Lay your groundwork for the outside evaluator(s)

When a group at an institution has decided that an outside evaluator might be of benefit to them it is essential that they involve everyone they possibly can who may be effected by the evaluation. All those involved and effected need to decide what the evaluator will evaluate and with whom she of

he will meet. If the group sponsoring the evaluator is not sure whom to involve, the evaluator should have ideas and should work closely with them developing a list of people. Outside evaluations that are imposed from the top down or from one group on another are doomed. Evaluations that are done without the cooperation of those effected will not only yield misleading information, but will cause serious damage, mistrust and hostility. Let me give two examples of evaluations I have done, one a disaster and the other a success.

A friend of mine who had been asked to do an evaluation of a large institution's English programs recommended me as a second evaluator. I was called at the last minute, assured everything had been made ready for the visit, and that my colleague had made suggestions on how the evaluation would be conducted. When we arrived on campus, we met first with a vice president of the university, then with the dean of the graduate college, then another vice president, then another dean, then the chair of the English Department and various administrators of the department. While all of these meetings were cordial and somewhat useful we realized near the end of our first day that we had talked to no faculty, no part-timers, no students, no support service people and had seen no classes. We had one more day to do the evaluation. Our schedule of visits had been put in general terms, and had been arranged in cooperation with the academic vice-president and the English Department chair. We met with the chair before leaving campus and were assured that we would get a chance to meet with all groups except the part-timers who had

"ignored" his request for a half-hour to meet with us. We later found out when we did meet with two faculty members that notices of our visit were put in mail boxes the night before our visit, that part-timers were told nothing, that students had not been contacted at all, and that only the reading development people of all the support services had been contacted. We also found out from one administrator that the idea for the evaluation had come from one of the state offices and that it had been required of all state institutions. The result was that we did not get the cooperation we needed to do a fair assessment. Money had been wasted; people's time had been wasted; and animosity was the only result I could see. Those involved in this so-called evaluation were most concerned that they not look bad. Our report which outlined the problems we faced and the problems inherent in the way we gathered our information was later "thrown out" with all the others that had been gathered across that state. Obviously, such arranged evaluations are worthless.

In a second, more successful evaluation done with a co-evaluator, I worked closely with the chair of the English Department and my co-evaluator to set the visit up. We arranged to meet with the president of the university, the Dean of Arts and Sciences, people involved in the writing across the curriculum program, the chair, future chair, tutors in the writing lab, students, part-timers, groups of faculty responsible for various courses, and a host of other people who had anything to do with writing on the campus. We received syllabi, course descriptions, booklets required for various classes, a school

bulletin, and other pertinent materials that would help us get an overview of the program. A letter from the chair detailed for us some of the history of the department and gave us an outline of what goals she, the dean, the department and others hoped for from the evaluation. Our visit went smoothly and people openly discussed what they saw as their strengths and weaknesses. The faculty (a mostly tenured-in group from the 50's and 60's) at first were reluctant to talk; we had been warned that some were simply waiting for retirement and were not about to change. At our first meeting with one group (after a slow five to ten minutes start) they began talking about how they needed time to catch up professionally, to find out about new ideas, to go to professional meetings and so forth. They seemed to us eager to get involved. We learned from the writing lab director and tutors the reluctance of students to go to the "bonehead" lab. We also found out who knew the most about composition theory, research and practice (tutors working on MA's told of an excellent new faculty member whom we talked to subsequently). From our visit we were able to describe in our report a faculty that worked hard and cared for students, but one that needed to participate in faculty development workshops, attend professional meetings and plan curriculum together. We also made suggestions on how the writing lab could change its image and serve everyone on the campus. As a result of out visit a writing director was appointed, faculty received increased money for self-development, improvements were made in the writing center, the first two writing courses were better articulated and "fit" together better. In other words, a good, experienced,

caring faculty had gotten the chance to revitalize itself by sharing discourse about common concerns.

RULE THREE: Give the evaluator a written overview of the state of things at the institution - an overview that reflects as much as possible the interests of everyone the evaluation will effect.

Someone from the group sponsoring an outside evaluator needs to give an overview of those things at the institution that may influence the evaluation. For example, if the state regents mandate certain requirements, these need to be known. If new general education requirements will effect the department, college or other unit in the institution, these need to be pointed out to the evaluator. If funding has been cut or increased for certain purposes, the evaluator should be alerted. All such information will help the evaluator balance recommendations so that they reflect the realities of the institution. Changes in personnel also should be noted so that the evaluator can use such information to advantage. For example, at one university when I evaluated the English major and writing program the state was experiencing financial problems, the department faculty had all been there at least twenty years, a new dean eager for change had been hired, a new chair was to take over in the fall, the existing WAC program was run by two faculty who were retiring, and a composition director had been hired for the first time with release from only one course. Such information can help an evaluator shape a report and its recommendations to address these circumstances directly. In the case of the new composition director the report showed how her responsibilities needed

to include course development, TA and part-timer training, in-service training for faculty and several other components not originally thought of when she was hired. The report helped people in the institution understand and justify further release time that would yield greater benefits to the university, department and students.

RULE FOUR: Send as much representative material and information as possible that will help the evaluator(s) accomplish the job.

Send materials that will help the evaluator(s) get a thorough understanding of your institution, department, and/or program. Catalogues help evaluator(s) understand the mission of the institution; booklets used in courses help the evaluator(s) see special focuses and emphases; syllabi are useful for seeing connections between courses and relationships to national trends. Obviously, all kinds of materials are useful in helping get an initial "fix" on an institution. Such materials help the evaluator(s) frame questions and shape the way the evaluation will be conducted. Listed below are possible items to send to the outside evaluator(s) in advance. Of course, each institution is unique, and what the evaluator(s) will need will be determined by the goals of the sponsoring group. At one school, for example, another evaluator and I used portfolios of writing (along with other materials) to assess the English major at a small, private university. We also conducted interviews with students to get an essential point of view on the major.

MATERIALS

A. School catalogues

B. Course guides for students

C. Descriptions of support services such as writing centers, reading/study labs, etc.

D. Syllabi

E. State guidelines for courses

F. Internal newsletter about faculty support services, etc.

G. Institutional guidelines for future development

H. Union agreements and charters that are relevant

I. Articles about the program, department, special courses, etc.

RULE FIVE: <u>On-campus meetings should be arranged with administrators, faculty, students, support personnel, part-timers.</u>

The visit to campus should include the top administrators on campus whenever possible. Also included should be deans, chairs, and anyone else connected with the purpose of the evaluation. Also, faculty, students, (tutors, TA's, research assistants, etc.), part-timers and those who run special support services need to be involved not only because they can give unique viewpoints and add useful information, but also because involving them in an assessment will more than likely make them allies in the process. To ignore any relevant group will almost always cause problems later. Also, leaving out someone potentially useful will limit the discourse needed to explore issues from an many angles as possible. Involving people such as the president, deans, faculty and

students makes them all take some time to think about the importance of whatever entity is being evaluated. It often helps people see the need for more support and can bring other unexpected benefits. The evaluation is more that just a way of assessing; it is also a way of influencing others and of bringing to their attention what the sponsoring group thinks is important.

RULE SIX: **Require a full, written report from the evaluator(s) within four weeks.**

The evaluator(s) will need time to sort through all that has been learned during the two or three day visit to your campus, but the written report needs to be done quickly. The faster the sponsoring group gets it back the more quickly it can move to implement recommendations. The final report should include:

1. Factual statements of whom the consultants met with.

2. A detailed analysis of all parts of the program effecting writing or general education or the departmental major or whatever, and should include an evaluation of the effectiveness of each part and how the parts work together.

3. A series of recommendations that lists most important items first using a priority ranked system where applicable.

4. Suggestions of how the recommendations might be implemented and resources of relevant information that can help the institution with implementation.

In one report I wrote I recommended that the name of the writing lab be changed to the Writing Center and that the goals of the center change so that

the image of the center would be changed from a remedial operation to a service for all students on campus. I included in the report sample materials from a few successful writing centers I had seen. These included flyers to faculty about the mission of the center, newspaper ads to attract students, orientation meetings and so forth. I have also included information about outside funding, research, faculty and staff development programs, and so forth. The important point is that the recommendations need to be linked with ides on how to accomplish them.

An outside evaluator (or consultant) can help groups within institutions bring about the changes they see as important. The evaluator helps focus the attention of top administrators, and faculty and students on goals seen as important by groups within the institution. How successful the evaluation will be depends on the thoroughness of how the evaluation is conducted. It should never be a surprise; and much like the expert witness in a trial the outside evaluator should know the field being assessed and should know the goals of those who have hired her/him and should feel comfortable professionally with that arrangement. An outside evaluator can help effect changes that faculty and administrators have been seeking, because they most often take on a status (when the groundwork is laid) that people within an institution cannot. They also give another (outside) point of view and expand the discourse community. If all connected with bringing in an outside evaluator is done right, the benefits will usually follow.